

Intentional teaching

ECE resources

Learning and teaching in early childhood involve complex interactions between teachers, children, contexts and content. Intentional teaching approaches recognise that teachers have a large role to play in orchestrating these interactions in order to bring about learning for children.

What is intentional teaching?

Intentional teaching involves constantly thinking about what you are doing as a teacher and how it will support or enable children's development and learning. It requires an awareness of and being deliberate, thoughtful, considered and purposeful in your teaching behaviours. It means actively planning and acting with specific goals or outcomes for children's learning in mind so that you can select the most appropriate ways to interact and extend children's thinking and development. It involves being intentional across all decision-making areas including curriculum, relationships, and administrative responsibilities.

Being intentional originates in your aspirations for children - knowing what valued learning you are aiming for children to achieve. It then requires that you be deliberate in your teaching to support or scaffold children towards those learning outcomes.

Intentional teaching is a dynamic process of decision-making, involving both planned experiences and spontaneous responses to children's emerging inquiries. Teaching actions and interactions must be constantly adjusted to adapt to children's responses and current level of competence in ways that promote teachers' aspirations and learning intentions.

Intentional teachers need a range of pedagogical strategies, an understanding of how children learn, and knowledge of children's individual learning capabilities and processes. Teachers also need to recognise children's intentions and be in tune with their interests so that curriculum is co-constructed rather than teacher-determined. Co-construction involves more than just learning alongside and from children – it requires teachers to support children with deep-level conversations to critique understandings and develop a range of skills for inquiry and critical and creative thinking.

Intentional teachers might:

- sensitively observe children and intentionally plan to deepen, extend and sustain children's interests through provocations, tools and resources, documentation and dialogue
- organise and maintain the physical environment to ensure access to appropriate resources and optimal support for positive experiences
- create specific challenges and plan interactions designed to extend children's capabilities and higher-order thinking skills
- participate in child-initiated play activities and develop complex imaginative role play narratives with children
- model and demonstrate skills as well as providing specific direction or instruction

However, developing a more intentional role should not be interpreted as requiring didactic techniques, nor should teachers neglect to focus on children's learning and their interests in favour of teachers' desired outcomes.

How does intentional teaching fit with teaching theories and philosophies?

Both developmental and constructivist approaches to early childhood curriculum emphasise teachers' intentionality in providing an environment appropriate to the child's current cognitive level that will facilitate learning and natural development. These approaches to early childhood education are often labelled 'child-centred' and are dominated by principles of freedom, children's interests and learning through play. While not entirely incompatible with intentional teaching, these approaches position the teacher as facilitative, non-directive and reactive, focused mainly on establishing and maintaining the learning environment, which makes teachers and teaching less visible.

Sociocultural theory emphasises children's cognitive activity occurring through social interaction with more knowledgeable adults and peers who are directly engaged in and guide the process of the construction of new understandings through participation in shared activities, including play. These approaches re-position teachers from a non-directive role to include intentional teaching and active involvement in children's play. While a constructivist or developmental perspective might emphasise children's free play as a means of developing abilities, sociocultural theory considers that children's interests, abilities, thinking, skills and knowledge, as expressed through child-initiated play, emerge as a result of stimulation by the people, places and things in their communities.

When quality play-based learning is considered to involve social relationships, interactions, and modelling, intentional teaching can be balanced with child-centred and play-based environments in which children are perceived as intentional learners. Children need opportunities to initiate activities and develop their own interests, but teachers are not passive observers. Instead, teachers can consider teaching to be a legitimate part of their professional practice as they support children to explore and extend their interests and learning experiences.

Why should I adopt intentional teaching?

Early childhood teachers have over 1000 interactions with children during a day, many of which are spontaneous and unplanned. Being intentional can help teachers make the most of these interactions. International and local research finds that sustained, reflective interactions are important for promoting increased learning for young children. Children are found to be engaged in more complex cognitive activities and effective learning when they play with and have positive social interactions with teachers.

Intentional teaching techniques such as scaffolding and extending children's learning are found to contribute to greater learning and positive outcomes for children. A key characteristic of quality early childhood settings associated with higher outcomes for children in the UK is the prevalence of high quality social and learning exchanges between teachers and children. These exchanges involve sustained shared thinking, scaffolding, explaining, questioning, modelling and extending children's ideas and activities, teachers' active involvement in children's play, and planning of challenging activities. In settings in which children's achievement is lower, staff are found to spend most of their time monitoring and observing children's play rather than interacting with children.

Well-resourced free play is not always found to be a sufficient condition for learning: for example, research finds that opportunities for free exploration within a richly resourced environment do not lead to sustained and meaningful encounters that support learning. A 'hands off' or laissez-faire approach

in relation to free play, which relies solely on children taking the lead in their own learning and places responsibility for learning progress on children, can result in missed teaching and learning opportunities.

How to teach intentionally

Intentional teaching hinges upon teachers' and families' aspirations for children, and determining and clarifying these is the very first step of an intentional approach to teaching. The agreed priorities for children's learning are then used to inform curriculum design, pedagogy, assessment and evaluation, and to focus teaching and learning, interactions and environments.

A shared sense of 'what matters here' or local priorities for curriculum

- **Offer families opportunities to determine priorities for the setting**, and ensure priorities reflect the context and philosophy of the setting. For example, valuing natural and authentic resources for children would be reflected in your environment, interactions and documentation.
- **Consider individual children's characteristics and development**, cultural values, their parents' aspirations, the knowledge valued in their community and a sense of what is ethical when determining priorities for learning and learning approaches.
- **Ensure priorities for learning provide children with opportunities** to pursue strengths and interests as well as to learn across the five strands of *Te Whāriki*.

Intentional assessment

- **Assess children's learning, including learning dispositions and working theories**, in order to make sound curriculum decisions. Analyse [assessment information](#) to track changes in children's capabilities and plan how to support their ongoing learning pathway.
- **Engage in informal assessment as you observe, listen to and interact with children** while they are engaged in activities and play. Analyse the child's current level of understanding and what they might be capable of with certain kinds of teaching support (their zone of proximal development). Determine which concepts and ideas are within reach of and of interest to children.
- **Gain an understanding of children's funds of knowledge**, or their [families' sets of knowledge](#), information, skills and strategies for wellbeing and everyday functioning, as knowledge of these will enable you to easily enter into and engage in children's play scenarios, and to deepen interactions.

Intentional pedagogies

- **Develop your knowledge of how children typically develop** as a result of interactions with their environment, as well as a range of possible teaching strategies and contexts that will lead to learning.
- **Consider a range of play opportunities beyond children's free play**, to include modelled play (for example, participating in role play) and purposefully-framed play (such as using play resources to introduce key concepts, issues or ideas), as well as adult-initiated and adult-guided experiences.
- **Select pedagogies by drawing on your deep knowledge of children's experiences, interests, and learning and development**. Blend teaching, learning and play by being engaged in children's learning and bringing your expertise and knowledge to it. Aim for gentle co-construction and challenging of ideas through open questions, and allow pedagogies and interactions to develop organically and intuitively as you interact with children and their interests, intentions, thinking and imagination.

Intentional curriculum design

- **Plan intentional and purposeful teaching interactions** building on and from children's play, and take time to really consider potential teaching actions and decisions. Determine whether you need

to say or do anything, what you are going to do and/or say, and how to set up the environment. Be intentional about including literacy and numeracy within meaningful experiences as desired practices for children.

- **Plan for effective questioning of children** that will promote your desired learning goals. Ask children how to find out more about things that interest them, how to make things happen, how and why things work, and how they can make their thoughts visible to others.
- **Consider how links with family and home life might be used intentionally** to support desired learning, and utilise understandings of each child's interests and funds of knowledge from home and community.

Intentional environments and interactions

- **Engage in teaching behaviours** such as demonstrating and modelling, asking open questions, speculating and wondering, shared problem-solving and shared thinking, while respecting children's own ways of working through their developing understandings.
- **Think carefully about the timing and content of your intervention:** decide when to participate in play or engage with children in order to extend learning or encourage creativity or critical thinking, aiming not to disrupt the spontaneity, concentration and focus of the play.
- **Develop your subject knowledge**, for example, to respond to children's interest in forces and resistance while playing on the slide. Teachers' subject knowledge which is found to lead to greater intentionality and more meaningful responses to children's learning and increased opportunities for scaffolding and extending children's learning.
- **Adapt interactions for children's diverse needs**, including their level of development, the amount of knowledge they have in relation to a particular topic or area of learning, their social competence and behaviour, and physical development.
- **Set up the environment with the intention to support the children** to explore particular concepts.
- **Be cautious of reactive supervision**, for example, sorting out turn-taking, which takes time away from intentional teaching such as supporting a child to solve a problem or develop understanding of a concept.

Intentional evaluation

- **Look, listen and interact with children to determine what they are learning**, and whether it is what you intended. Observe whether children demonstrate any additional knowledge or skill as a result of your teaching practices. Intentional teaching won't always be successful.
- **Reflect upon and interpret your observations of and interactions with children**, and develop a customised response. Reflection can help teachers to think about their interactions and relationships, including how best to relate to children and respond to their cues in an individualised way.

Further Reading

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Hedges, H., & Cooper, M. (2018). Relational play-based pedagogy: Theorising a core practice in early childhood education, *Teachers and Teaching*, 24(4), 369-383. doi: 10.1080/13540602.2018.1430564

Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Manni, L. (2008). 'Would you like to tidy up now?' An analysis of adult questioning in the English Foundation Stage. *Early Years*, 28(1), 5-22. doi: 10.1080/09575140701842213

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Dr Vicki Hargraves

Vicki is a teacher, mother, writer, and researcher. She recently completed her PhD using philosophy to explore creative approaches to understanding early childhood education. She is inspired by the wealth of educational research that is available and is passionate about making this available and useful for teachers.